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ABSTRACT

When the ideology of individualism is used in composition studies to create a hero image for the writer/teacher, the effect is to exclude from the "hero status" people who do not fit the requirements of the ideology. However beautiful and powerful a story it may be, for instance, Mike Rose's "Lives on the Boundary" puts forth an image of academic heroism that equates intellectual advancement and success in the university with maleness. Further, it employs language with sexual implications, implications that would be inappropriate when applied to a female teacher because of society's perception of a woman's role in romantic relationships. It may be that teaching is sexual--Peter Elbow thinks so--but if academic heroism adopts this paradigm, then there is the possibility that women and men, students and teachers, will be relegated to the unequal positions in which they are traditionally placed in a sexual relationship, particularly when there is a question of being natural or unnatural, legal or illegal. Offering an alternative to exclusive hero models, Lynn Bloom's "Teaching College English as a Woman" and Victor Villanueva's "Bootstraps" define heroism in terms of endurance and perseverance in the face of unfairness and inequities. Despite the fact that men collectively give Bloom the worst sort of liberal education, she continues her fight for a place in the English Department. Similarly, Villanueva argues beautifully for the importance of recognizing the contributions, the capabilities, and the belongingness of minorities both in the profession of composition and rhetoric and in the United States. (TB)

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The Making of Heroes in Composition

I believe in the heroism of teaching. I have always wanted to be a teacher, and I want very much to do world-changing teaching, to matter to some student or students later in their lives--to be a hero to them. As a graduate student in Composition Studies, I discovered a meaning and a purpose lacking in my earlier master's degree work in Victorian studies. But I have also discovered how troubled I am by the notion of the teacher-hero depicted in some composition scholarship, by certain self-representations of heroism that are constructed in such a way that excludes me and others from membership in the academic circle. Two examples of this kind of hero-tale are Peter Elbow's Embracing Contraries and Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary.

I am not the first person to be disturbed by aspects of autobiographical hero-making in composition scholarship. James V. Catano explains how the myth of heroic self-making creates a masculinist rhetoric when applied to pedagogical theory. Catano describes how such rhetoric fails to endow female students and teachers of writing with power as equally as it does males--because it must always aggressively assert its own masculinity. In a recent essay, John Trimbur too hastily dismisses the problematic elements of self-making in Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary,

claiming that Rose's coming-of-age narrative attempts to "rearticulate the social and ideological force of the American mythos in the name, the voices, and the interests of the many" (49). However, Trimbur fails to consider that Rose is not rearticulating social and ideological forces of mythos in terms of gender--he is not speaking in the name, the voices, or the interests of the female.

Rose's Lives on the Boundary is a beautiful story of one individual against the world, a tale written in vivid, powerful language. It is as the title promises, a moving book. So powerfully does Rose write that I did not at first notice the masculinist bias in the world that Rose represents and in the image of hero-teacher that Rose creates. For example, all of the teachers who delivered Rose into the realm of academic respectability and power were men, whom Rose explicitly praises in terms of gender rather than occupation, calling them "those four men" (Rose 58). Men like Brother Clint--the biology teacher who "discovered the error" (30) that had imprisoned Rose in the academic dungeon of vocationdom--recognize Rose's genius, teach him the scholarly ropes, allow him to develop his critical mind as well as his language abilities, and serve as models of teaching behavior for him--as his heroes.

If Rose had not included the song "I'm a Man" in his narrative, perhaps the masculinist bent of his story would have eluded me. But in chapter three in which Rose tells the story of

his entry into the circle of intellectual, academic conversation, he twice asserts: "I'm a man/I'm a full-grown man" (40)--first before his description of falling under the spell of his teacher, MacFarland; second, after describing how he worked on a college campus literary magazine, as an insider, "oiling a few gears" (62): "Now I'm a man/I made 21." (62)

This connection between masculinity and the intellectual (both are definitions of the Latin virtus) is reinforced in another vignette, in which Rose discourses on the pure intellect of Gabriel Marcel. Rose witnesses the transformation of a "tiny, bent man . . . all missteps and wild angles" (62) into the "pure mind that Yeats longed for" (62) in "Sailing to Byzantium." Intellectual brilliance takes the place of virility and physical beauty in Rose's description of Marcel (63). Rose's alteration of Yeats's quote from "aged man" to "aged person," indicative perhaps of a conscious concern about sexism, ironically highlights the more integral connection between intellect and maleness. Clearly, one implication of Rose's hero-tale is that the academic world is populated by men, and the ideal teacher is male.

Rose does describe one female teacher who provided him with a learning experience during his formative years as a member of the Teacher Corps: Rosalie Naumann. However, Naumann's contribution to Rose's development as a teacher is this advice: "do something nice [with your students]" (93). This is very close to being a stereotypical treatment of female advice-giving, bearing a certain

resemblance to a response from "Dear Abbey." In addition, Rose draws upon "damsel in distress" lore in his illustration of how much Naumann's students admired and respected her:

> One of her students, a fifth-grade boy, slug a sixth grader who was not one of her students, for mocking the way she walked (92).

This is a sweet example of a child's affection for his teacher, but also rather sexist. It could be seen as alluding to the idea that women must be defended against all attacks on their virtue (she walks funny, said the sixth grader), by their courageous and honorable male knights--in this case a fifth grade boy.

Further, Rose twice describes teaching using the metaphor of a romantic relationship.

First, he says, "Teaching . . . was a kind of romance. . . . You wooed kids with these things, invited a relationship of sorts" (102). I agree that the best kind of teaching is that which encourages the development of several relationships--with the subject, with other students, and even with the teacher. However, as a married, female teacher with one child, it probably is not a good idea for me to woo a class. Invite a relationship, yes; behave in the manner of a courting beau, no. My objection, then, centers around the word "woo" for the reason that there are negative connotations to the idea of women initiating romantic relationships. Women beguile, seduce, chase, snare, and so forth. This image is particularly troubling because "kids" are the ones

being wooed here. I am not sure that a "Mrs. Robinson" image of a teacher is helpful or suitable.

Second, Rose describes teaching and education as: "a cultural and linguistic heritage received not from some pristine conduit, but exchanged through the heat of human relation" (225). I wonder about the overtones in this description. Biologically, during the heat of certain human relations, I am not sure that a two-way exchange occurs: men deposit and women receive. Therefore, I have a certain amount of difficutly in seeing how female teachers fit in this image of teaching.

Elbow also uses the metaphor of teaching as a sexual act in Embracing Contraries, a collection of twenty years worth of writings exploring teaching, learning, and writing. In this book Elbow declares: "I possess in good measure the impulse to nail down the truth about teaching once and for all, and on that basis to tell everyone how to teach" (69). The insight that Elbow then offers is:

> The one thing sure is that teaching is sexual. What is uncertain is which practices are natural and which unnatural, which fruitful and which barren, which legal and which illegal. When the sexuality of teaching is more generally felt and admitted, we may finally draw the obvious moral: it is a practice that should only be performed upon the persons of consenting adults. (70)

Obviously, Elbow is not referring to teaching in elementary and

secondary schools here. However, the metaphor is still disturbing. Notice how the following description of a conference between Elbow and his student plays out the politics of sexuality:

> Realized that I had been feeling she was "out of it." Mad at her for not trying, holding back. Feeling she is fighting me, fighting the course; that I am failing with her; that she is going to get me; I've got to wrestle with her and get her to stop doing this thing.
>
> Tried pulling back and getting her to talk. Asking her what does she need from me. It worked. The crucial breakthrough was when it finally came clear that she needed to say, "I need to do it myself." (And, by implication, I have to stop pushing her.) It really worked, even though she was having a hard time. It started out with me in the familiar rut: bothered, angry, but pretending to be rational with her. Her, locked into a held-back silence. I broke out of that.
>
> How can I remember this and reproduce it? (39)

This description occurs as a footnote to an earlier chapter and is not intended in the book to illustrate the sexuality of teaching. However, I included the description in its entirety here precisely because its language easily evokes a sexual reading, and in doing so, reveals the troubling aspects of the sexuality metaphor.

Yes, it is possible to see teaching as sexual. But if teaching is sexual, then there is the possibility that women and men--students and teachers--will be relegated to the unequal positions in which they are traditionally placed in a sexual relationship, particularly when there is a question of being natural or unnatural, legal or illegal. In this example, Elbow assumes the traditional subject position and places the student in the object position. Even though the breakthrough moment is when the student says she needs to do her work herself, Elbow takes responsibility for her assertion of subjectivity, saying: "I broke out of that."

Since power is already distributed unequally in the relationship between student and teacher, I feel that describing teaching in terms of another unequally distributed power relationship is not only unhelpful, but also potentially destructive. Thus, the images of teaching and teachers that Rose and Elbow provide in their stories are troubling to the extent that they exclude women or reinforce stereotypical roles for women and men in the classroom.

Fortunately, there are other kinds of hero-tales in composition studies, tales that do not exclude me. The hero-images created in Lynn Bloom's "Teaching College English as a Woman" and Victor Villanueva's Bootstraps are the kind of heroes that I admire and that I want to emulate. Theirs is the heroism of endurance, of

refusing to accept the status quo, and of articulately asserting the right to belong.

Bloom's story concerns the presence or absence of "voice" and illustrates gender-related inequities in the system that is the "English department." Throughout much of her early career as a teacher of English, Bloom had no voice. Rather than serving as indicators of her membership in the academic community, Bloom's professional activities--teaching, research, publication, and service--"reflected badly on [her] femininity" (822).

Bloom is excluded from active membership in the academic circle by professors, department chairs, and so on who bear a certain resemblance to the "wonderful men" Rose praises in his hero- tale. An honors professor gives Bloom a "C" on her paper entitled "Milton's Eve did too have some redeeming virtues," for the sole reason that "you simply can't say that" (819). The full-time male faculty "at one of our nation's very finest universities" (819) belittle Bloom and the other female teachers of freshman composition for considering the editing of textbooks as legitimate work (819). Then, there is the department chair who fires all the part-time teachers of freshman composition; it's a "lowly subject" that need only be taught by graduate students (820).

These men collectively give Bloom the worst sort of liberal education: they teach her that she is not part of the intellectual circle--she is not a part of "we" (822). In her words, "I was treated as an illegal alien" (821).

However, Bloom is heroic in my opinion. Her story depicts the heroism of endurance, of resistance, symbolized by her refusal to allow herself to be victimized by an unknown assailant. "I don't deserve this" (825) is her chant, and it saves not only her life, but the life of one of her students years later. However, Bloom consciously refuses to take responsibility for saving her student's life: "You saved your own life," (825) she says. Her response emphasizes the subject position of the student, rather than privileging the subject position of Bloom as teacher.

Bloom doesn't set out to revolutionize the English department; she only wants to be allowed to exist, to be recognized as a contributing member, as a valid member of the English department--as belonging to that circle of which Rose is so fond.

Victor Villanueva's book Bootstraps is also about voice and belonging. He discusses beautifully the importance of recognizing the contributions, the capabilities, the belongingness of minorities, both in the profession of composition and rhetoric and in this country. His story is an attempt to explain "how traditions continue, good old-fashioned traditions which have excluded too many of us for too long or else have alienated us from our own traditions" (xvi). As such, Villanueva's story is what Rose's wanted to be. It is the story of "us": "long-time citizens and residents who never quite assimilate" (xvi).

In vignettes about his "heroes," Villanueva depicts the blindness of otherwise intelligent, capable, responsible people,

members of the academic community, in order to "suggest the limitations of liberalism, the ideology that . . . change is an individual concern" (120). One limitation is that such ideology of self-making does not take into consideration that the "many" to which Trimbur referred earlier can speak in their own voices. ARE speaking in their own voices. The limitation of this ideology is that it has the effect of excluding these voices.

Therefore, when the ideology of individualism is used in composition studies to create a hero image for the author, the effect is to exclude from the "hero status" people who do not fit the requirements of the ideology. In other words, women and men who are not white, upper-middle-class, etc. Bloom and Villanueva are my heroes, because the image of hero-teacher in their stories is inclusionary rather than exclusionary. By pointing out the fact that entry into the circle of intellectual academic conversation is quite often denied to many in the name, the voices, and the interests of the few, these kinds of hero-tales provide a valuable service. They expand the academic circle, representing teachers gate-openers rather than gate-keepers.

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